

Testimony of Vietnam Veterans of America



Presented by

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BEFORE THE

House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economics Opportunity

REGARDING

**A Review of the President Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request for the
Department of Labor Employment Training Services (VETS)**

February 11, 2015

Good afternoon Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and members of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. On behalf of VVA National President John Rowan and all of our officers and members we thank you for the opportunity for Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) to appear here today to share our views regarding the Review of the President Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request for the Department of Labor Employment Training Services (VETS).

For more than thirty years Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) has repeatedly advocated for the “wellness” model as the paradigm toward which all of the programs, benefits, and services for should be aimed. What this means is that it is the duty of the people of the United States, through our government institutions and with our community resources, to do everything possible to restore the men and women who have placed their lives on the line in the common defense to the highest degree of autonomy and functioning possible following that military service.

Said another way, all of us should be using a “holistic” view of the physiological, neuro-psychiatric, and psycho-social aspects of health of all returning veterans, but particularly disabled veterans. The ‘litmus test’ of achieving the highest degree of “wellness” possible for veterans of working age is the ability to obtain and sustain meaningful employment.

While VVA still believes that the Nation’s health care system for veterans is still under-funded, despite fairly strong to strong increases in the past ten years, and that the organizational capacity of the VHA is not yet adequate to meet the full range of legitimate needs of the eligible veterans’ population, the simple fact is that we as a Nation do spend billions every year on health care, readjustment counseling, vocational rehabilitation, educational benefits, PTSD treatment, substance abuse treatment, and numerous other programs designed to assist veterans. However, if the veteran is not assisted to obtain and sustain meaningful employment, then there is no “payoff” for the individual or for the Nation.

To use a football analogy, without the ‘points on the board,’ it does not matter how many yards in offense one compiles. One can argue that we expend all of our energy in moving the ball eighty plus yards down the field, but have not concentrated enough on how to actually get the ball into the end zone to score. Assisting veterans to obtain and sustain meaningful work at a living wage gets us

into the end zone for that veteran or disabled veteran, and puts points on the board. So, securing a job, and being able to keep that job, is a key component (perhaps THE key component) of the readjustment of veterans to civilian life, helping each veteran achieve the highest degree of autonomy and “wellness” possible, which is (or should be) the explicit goal of every program and service for veterans of working age.

It is because of this centrality of obtaining and securing meaningful employment at a living wage is in the readjustment process, particularly of disabled veterans of any age, and of OIF/OEF veterans, that what this distinguished Subcommittee does is so key to a “pay-off” of all of the rest of the efforts extended by our nation.

It is because of the centrality of helping veterans where they can obtain and sustain meaningful employment at a living wage that has prompted VVA to urge that a fourth Division of the VA be created as a major legislative priority. It becomes clearer every year that the Labor Department is incapable or unwilling to obey the law, and ensure that veterans are treated properly by ensuring real priority of service in all employment and training programs funded by or through the Department of Labor (DOL). It does not seem to matter who the Secretary of Labor is, or which Administration is in power, or who is the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans Employment & Training (ASVET), nor any other factor.

I have spent the greater part of my adult life focused on helping provide services to veterans to eliminate or ameliorate barriers to employment, to assist veterans to obtain education or training that will lead toward marketable job skills, and assisting in developing job and career opportunities for veterans, especially disabled veterans. I have seen the mood of the public, and of the employer community wane, and wax and wane again toward hiring veterans and disabled veterans. There have sometimes been significant private sector efforts like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce “Hiring Our Heroes” program, public/private efforts such as “Joining Forces,” and occasional highly visible public efforts to assist veterans.

The milieu has been a constantly changing one in the tone of the job market in regard to being “veteran friendly” to not so favorable. Sometimes the VA has taken (or tried to do) significant actions to assist veterans with employment, with some success, but nothing that is consistent over a number of years.

The only two things that has been consistent is the lack of any serious and meaningful effort from the U.S. Department of Labor as a department that makes a difference nationally to those veterans in often desperate need of assistance with being able to earn a living. The only thing that USDOL officials have been consistent on is rhetorical professions of “highest respect” for veterans that have not been backed up by resources or action, as well as vociferous opposition to any move that might force them to action or face a loss of the veterans funding.

Many observers in this struggle for veterans’ employment assistance rights over the years have described this as USDOL, and their state counterparts, as not wanting to do the job but not wanting anyone else to be able to do it either. Certainly the state entities regard the DVOP/LVER program as a “*cash cow*” that provides resources for one purpose that are diverted as much as possible for other purposes that are more important to them than veterans, and can be expected to fight hard against any efforts to hold them accountable for performance or face a loss in what they regard as a “*revenue stream*.” Many of us regard this as a duty and a mission that is vital to individual veterans, and to our nation’s future, and not as a “*revenue stream*.”

To those to whom helping individual veterans get and keep good jobs is not a mission of the greatest national importance, let it be our common cause to make sure that their days are numbered.

Without a dramatic structural change, of course, nothing of consequence for veterans is going to improve. That is why VVA is strongly committed is strongly committed to creating the “Veterans Economic Opportunities Administration” at the VA. We are, of course, even more keenly aware of the past and present shortcomings at the VA, especially in regard to accountability. However, VA at least does really have to care about the veterans’ organizations and the Committees on Veterans Affairs. Labor does not have to.....and therefore does not, unless you count midnight phone calls to the Senate from Australia to stop any meaningful change unanimously passed by the House of Representatives in the last Congress.

Each Secretary of Labor for the last thirty years, including the current Secretary, could have used part of the Secretary’s contingency fund from what is now known as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) to drive behavior in states and local areas that help veterans by according incentive grants to those who do the best job of actually placing veterans in real jobs. None have done so, which renders their rhetoric even more empty and hollow when they hold their by invitation only

“Salute to All America Veterans” in the Great Hall or another venue in the Francis Perkins Building (USDOL Headquarters) just before Veterans Day each year. Security is always tight, lest any rank and file veterans get in, and unemployed veterans need not apply.

In addition to creation of the new division of VA that shall be required to move away from the attitudes pervasive in Compensation & Pension that inhibit a culture of self-fulfillment and self-sustainment in the current set up at VA, create that new entity that is a “do over” and build a new organization and corporate culture that is not inhibited by the desperate desire for the status quo and any meaningful accountability. This will not be as politically difficult at VA as it is at Labor. That same desire for no accountability dominates all of the Department of Labor, but most strongly emanates from the Employment & Training Administration (ETA) at Labor.

Even Senator Strom Thurmond, the greatest champion in the Congress for meaningful employment assistance to veterans in my lifetime, was unable to break the anti-veteran hold of ETA on Labor. Because ETA can’t/won’t entertain any true measurement and accountability, they (despite a changing cast) continue the resistance to accountability regarding veterans, as it would open the door for accountability in the rest of their activities.

The Vision and Mission statement of VETS is:

VETS Vision and Mission Statement

“Meaningful and Successful Careers for All Veterans”

VETS Proudly Serves Veterans & Service Members! We Provide Resources and Expertise to Assist and Prepare them to Obtain Meaningful Careers, Maximize their Employment Opportunities, and Protect their Employment Rights.

You will notice that the mission statement does not say anything about job placement, or any veteran actually getting a job by going to one of the Career Centers. We do not have time here to dwell of the obvious flaws in how they measure success, but I will note that it is the largest example of the “post hoc, ergo propter hoc” logical fallacy I have ever seen. They know it is baloney, which is why they try to avoid any detailed discussion of the matter.

VVA strongly recommends that with the transfer of VETS to VA that the emphasis be on actual placement in jobs, and not the silly and misleading “performance” reports we now have. What is on their web site is not only not helpful to those of us interested in accountability, but the current staff of more than 50 persons at the VETS office in Washington (more than the number of staff on the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees combined!) cannot produce evidence that their memo of last March is working at the service delivery points, even for this hearing, which they knew for months was coming!

VVA proposes a *national Veterans Bill of Rights for Employment Services* as part of the move to VA. It would be partially modeled on an effort that took place in New York twenty five years ago, which was successful for a time. The reason for this success was simple in that it boiled down the provisions in Title 38, US Code, sections (chapters 41, 42, and 43) to simple statements that would matter to individual veterans.

The two most important elements were: One, that every person who entered a Job Service Office or One Stop Center was asked “Did you serve on active duty in the United States military?” and if so, they were given a die cut tri-fold card (see the next page) that folded to the exact size of a credit card to go into the veterans’ wallet; The cards were reinforced by posters and PSAs. There were also versions of the cards and posters in Spanish.

Two, there was a prominently featured toll free number to call for redress if the veteran was not satisfied with the local response. That was followed by quick direct action that by telephone directed the office manager to immediately rectify the situation, and report back to the state office electronically or by phone as to what the result of corrective action. Each veteran who contacted the toll free number was logged in, and received a personal letter from a state official, asking them to call that official directly if they had not received satisfaction.

Implementing the same mechanism at the Federal level would also work, in that while the complaint would initially be sent to the state level to correct, the Federal level would follow up via e-mail or post card directly to the veteran or other eligible person (e.g., surviving spouse of a KIA or MIA).

I want to stress a number of things at this juncture, to emphasize that these are recommendations by Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) based on performance (or lack thereof) by organizational entities, and are in no way based on ad hominem arguments, nor a lack of respect for the many wonderful men and women who try and often manage to do their job well under adverse circumstances:

1) VVA has great respect and fondness for the Honorable Keith Kelly, who is a decorated Army combat infantry officer who served in Vietnam, and who came home to the same less than open-armed conditions most of us encountered (with the exception of his wonderful wife and child) and overcame to succeed in building a life of meaning, decency, and service.

2) The few staff we do know who are currently at VETS are fine individuals, such as Brian Hawthorne, an Army veteran with six deployments as a combat medic in the recent wars, and a strong leader of Student Veterans of America (SVA) until he entered civilian government service.

Most of the national VETS staff members, whom we do not know because of lack of opportunity for regular contact on adequate notice, may be bright and competent, but we have no idea of their qualifications, commitment, skill, nor even what they do. There is no reason why the position descriptions, position qualifications, hiring authorities used to hire each, veterans' preference eligible status of each, and the reporting lines should not be on the VETS web site.....but apparently are not. VVA can, I suppose, file a FOIA request with the Department of Labor to obtain this public information, and wait six to eighteen months or two years or longer while we wrangle with their many dozen attorneys who are likely to contest or slow roll any such request from a veterans' service organization. Perhaps the committee might have better luck at obtaining this basic public information.

3) Perhaps most importantly, I personally and VVA as an organization have the highest respect for the dedicated men and women who serve as Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veteran Employment Representatives (LVERs). The same holds true for current and retired Directors, Veterans Employment & Training and their assistants at the state level (DVETS and ADVETS). Many do just extraordinary work for veterans...no matter how much they are punished for it, and despite what is often a lack of any meaningful support from their managers, or even the travel funds and other resources needed

to do the job properly. Incidentally, DVOPs and LVERs would not have their lives disrupted by loss of position funding nor change in duty station with the move to the Veterans Employment Opportunities Administration at VA. The major change is that their bosses would have to let them do their jobs, and provide them with the travel funds and other resources necessary for proper performance.

Request for FY2016 Funding

The request for FY 2016 is, of course, not adequate, as have been the budget requests for many years. If there were any meaningful accountability of bang for the tax payers dollar, and measures of performance we could rely on, VVA would have continued to fight hard for increased amounts. The fact that level funding applies to the key veterans' programs as long as they are at the Department of Labor is only one more argument for placing the programs at VA.

The amount of \$175 Million is probably not adequate for the grants to the states, but until there is greater accountability for performance it is difficult to argue for much more. The amount for the *National Veterans Employment and Training Institute* needs to be at least at the level of \$3.5 Million, if not higher, as it enhances and magnifies the skills of all who attend their various courses.

The request for the *Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program* (HVRP) should be increased from \$38.1 Million to at least \$56 Million. HVRP is the most cost effective, cost efficient program funded by or through the USDOL. It is performance based, with measures of actual job placements as the measure of success.

While we continue to get very mixed reports at best on the TAP program from separating veterans, and have serious doubts as to the state of USERRA enforcement, and the usefulness of the VETS current performance of their role in helping enforce veterans preference or VEVRA, we will refrain from comment at this time.

VVA thanks Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and the distinguished Members of this Subcommittee for the opportunity to share our views here this afternoon.

I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

**VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Funding Statement
February 12, 2015**

The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For Further Information, Contact:

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Richard F. “Rick” Weidman is Executive Director for Policy and Government Affairs on the National Staff of Vietnam Veterans of America. As such, he is the primary spokesperson for VVA in Washington. He served as a 1-A-O Army Medical Corpsman during the Vietnam War, including service with Company C, 23rd Med, AMERICAL Division, located in I Corps of Vietnam in 1969.

Mr. Weidman was part of the staff of VVA from 1979 to 1987, serving variously as Membership Service Director, Agency Liaison, and Director of Government Relations. He left VVA to serve in the Administration of Governor Mario M. Cuomo as statewide director of veterans’ employment & training (State Veterans Programs Administrator) for the New York State Department of Labor.

He has served as Consultant on Legislative Affairs to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), and served at various times on the VA Readjustment Advisory Committee, the Secretary of Labor’s Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment & Training, the President’s Committee on Employment of Persons with Disabilities - Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans, Advisory Committee on Veterans’ Entrepreneurship at the Small Business Administration, and numerous other advocacy posts. He currently serves as Chairman of the Task Force for Veterans’ Entrepreneurship (VET-Force), which has become the principal collective voice for veteran and disabled veteran small-business owners.

Mr. Weidman was an instructor and administrator at Johnson State College (Vermont) in the 1970s, where he was also active in community and veterans affairs. He attended Colgate University (B.A., 1967), and did graduate study at the University of Vermont.

He is married and has four children.